**Sermon Sunday 27th June 2021 at Stowe Church**

**9.45am – Trinity 4**

Paul’s Second Missionary Journey

Acts 17: 1-9; Mark 11: 27-33

Thessalonica – Jewish opposition

I start with a story. It’s a true story about a man called Albert McMakin – you may not have heard of him.

Albert McMakin lived in the mid-West of the USA early in the 20th century. He was a very ordinary farmer, not given to many words. However, he was a committed Christian. He heard that a preacher was coming to a nearby town, a man called Mordecai Ham, and he thought to himself he ought to do something about it. He decided to take his small pick-up and drive around the streets of his little town inviting the young people who hung around on the street corners to come and hear the preacher.

On the first night he came across a tall, willowy young man, fairly resistant to coming. Albert McMakin was no fool. He said, "If you want you can drive the pick-up there." The young man came along. Each night of the week Albert McMakin repeated his invitation, each night he took a small group of boys. It came to the last night and he was feeling tired, but decided he would fulfil his commitment to go each evening. Same resistant teenager, same opportunity to drive.

Mordecai Ham spoke well, and invited people to respond by getting up out of their seats and walking down to the front to commit their lives to Jesus. To Albert's surprise, the tall willowy, resistant teenager stood and walked down the front. No one has ever heard of Albert Mc Makin. But the name of the teenager....Billy Graham.

God wants to write us into the story of other people's lives. It doesn't matter whether they become a Billy Graham or not. God wants to use us. Who knows, someone we know may well be saying in 10 years 'It's because of you that I'm here today.'

Our reading from Acts is the account of a couple of people you **have** heard of – Paul and Silas. They, like Albert McMakin, and Billy Graham, wanted to spread the good news of Jesus more and more widely, and so they got the church together to commission them to go round, not the local neighbourhood but much more widely. Today we are reading about the second such Missionary journey Paul undertook.

A few notes about the context of Paul’s second missionary journey: In all, it took about three years and took him and Silas from Syrian Antioch first through the churches of Syria and Cilicia. Then they went re-visit churches in the regions of Derbe, Lystra, Iconium and Pisidian Antioch. Then there followed a period of uncertainty where Paul was not sure where to go next, culminating in the vision he had in Troas, from where they crossed to Neapolis (modern Naples) and Philippi. (In other words, this was their first venture from Asia Minor into Europe.) Philippi to Thessalonica (today) and Berea (next week), Athens and Corinth. From Corinth they went to Jerusalem via Ephesus, then back to Antioch where they had started.

Verse 1 condenses a great deal of effort and activity in a very economical way. ‘When they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica.’ If that sounds like an afternoon stroll, think again: Paul and Silas started in Philippi, walking 33 miles from Amphipolis; and it was a further 30 miles to Apollonia, and then 37 more miles to Thessalonica. That’s at least 100 miles. They really meant business when they set out on their missionary journeys. This was not for the faint-hearted. And remember, they had just arrived from Philippi, where they had been beaten and arrested – and more-or-less thrown out of the city. You wouldn’t have blamed Paul and Silas for giving up at this point, having had such rough treatment in Philippi. But they were made of sterner stuff, and with the power of the Holy Spirit urging them on they continued to Thessalonica.

One of the most important Roman roads at this time was called the Egnatian Way, which linked the Adriatic Sea to the Middle East. The main street in Thessalonica was actually part of that route, so it was a strategic city in many ways. If Christianity could be firmly founded in Thessalonica, it could spread both east and west along the main road, becoming a major highway to expand the Kingdom of God. It was also an important port, with trade across the Aegean Sea.

As usual, Paul began his work in Thessalonica in the synagogue. Earlier, in ch 13, when they were in Pisidian Antioch, we read that Paul had made a deliberate decision to ‘turn to the Gentiles’, but he was still a Jew and remained true to his Judaism. For three weeks he argued the case for the Christian faith with the Jews, and with any Gentiles who were listening – and there were plenty, some of them very influential, and many were women. So on the face of it Paul was gaining ground in the town, and many came to faith. Incidentally, Luke is well ahead of his time in his attitude to women, because he notes that many prominent women became Christians, both here in Thessalonica and also Berea (next week).

Unfortunately, all this caused opposition from the Jewish ruling elite. Isn’t it always the same? They didn’t seem to like someone new appearing and upsetting the applecart. Their prestige was threatened. So they resorted to underhand tactics by rabble-rousing, encouraging an unruly mob to protest on their behalf, and they went looking for Paul and Silas to drag them before the authorities. They didn’t find them, so they looked for the next best target: a man called Jason, who had welcomed the missionaries into his house as guests. I suppose the Jews would call them colluders.

Jason and his friends were charged with preaching political insurrection and rebellion – a charge they knew was a lie. Look at v.6 – ‘These men have caused trouble all over the world.’ In a way they are paying a great compliment to the effectiveness of the spread of Christianity; they were admitting that the Christian message was supremely effective. And it is a challenge. We should not be surprised that preaching the gospel can divide an audience, as it certainly did in Thessalonica.

A child once remarked that the books of the New Testament end with the book of Revolutions. What is true is that when Christianity goes into action it is bound to cause a revolution, both in the individual life as well as in society.

I don’t call myself an evangelist. It’s not one of my gifts. But that doesn’t get me off the hook for the spread of the gospel. Not everyone is an evangelist, but we are all witnesses. Read Jesus’ Great Commission and notice it applies to you as much as it did to them then. ‘You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.’

Jesus still needs witnesses. If we are Christians, then we have a story to tell. We should be prepared to tell it – 1 Peter 3: 15 ‘Always be prepared to give an answer to anyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. ‘ And Paul write in the first chapter of Romans ‘For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes.’

A bishop once complained: "When Paul preached there were riots; when I preach they give me a cup of tea". But I’m not put off by that: in both cases the gospel was preached. We are not usually called to reap the harvest, which is in any case the work of the Holy Spirit; we are always called to sow the seed.

And did Paul’s visit to Thessalonica succeed? On the face of it, no; look at the next verse just after our reading: ‘As soon as it was night, the brothers sent Paul and Silas away to Berea.’ Looks like another failure, chucked out of yet another ciry. But wait. Paul wrote a letter to them some time later, saying this: ‘Our visit to you was not a failure.’ (1 Thess 2:1) He goes on, ‘We thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but the word of God, which is at work in you who believe.’